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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE WAFFLING ON EFFORT TO CONTROL FOOD RELIEF EFFORTS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: In meetings with House International Relations Committee Africa Subcommittee staffer Malik Chaka August 20-21, Minister for Special Affairs (and ZANU-PF Party Chairman) John Nkomo and Minister of Public Service, Labor and Social Services July Moyo emphasized the government's priority on assuring smooth relations with the international humanitarian relief community. They maintained that a recently announced policy requiring food assistance to be channeled through village headmen was meant to assure broader and more transparent distribution, and not to disrupt or to politicize distribution. During the past week, the government appears to be softening its stance, at least in response to the donors. WFP/UNDP is currently negotiating an MOU with the government that will clarify policy. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Nkomo told Chaka on August 20 that a new GOZ policy issue on August 14 requiring humanitarian food relief to be administered through village headmen and rural councils was intended to enhance transparency and local involvement. (NOTE: The government quietly promulgated the policy in July but only publicized and began attempting to implement it in August. The policy, which was announced in provincial level meetings with NGOs, severely limits NGO involvement in selecting beneficiaries and undertraking physical distribution, both of these functions being transferred to headmen and rural councils dominated by ZANU-PF. The initial meetings were attended by Minister of Social Welfare Moyo and Foreign Minister Mudenge, who reportedly spoke to the NGOs present in harsh and confrontational terms. END NOTE)

13. (SBU) Nkomo reported that there had problems in local distribution efforts, including efforts by some relief workers to politicize the distribution. Headmen knew the local communities most closely and were best situated to administer distribution in a manner that would fully address the beneficiaries' needs. Nkomo emphasized that the headmen were not in the government; district administrators and other government representatives could monitor distributions but could not control application of eligibility criteria. He emphasized that transparency and broader distribution were the policy's principal objectives. Nkomo said that he understood Chaka's and Ambassador Sullivan's concerns that the policy would disrupt and politicize food distribution and assured them the government would work with relevant donors on details.

14. (SBU) Moyo essentially echoed Nkomo's points in a meeting with Chaka and Ambassador Sullivan on August 21. He maintained that the policy was not new, it merely memorialized practices already in effect -- a catalogue of best practices in effect. He assured that donors would maintain control over their programs by setting criteria and closely monitoring distributions undertaken by headmen. He noted the value of international efforts but asserted that they generated numerous local complaints -- more so than government food distributions. The new policy was intended to minimize such complaints. Moyo reported that, discounting WFP commitments and government purchases, Zimbabwe may still be 600,000 tons short of meeting its food needs, underscoring the importance of continued close collaboration with the international community.

14. (SBU) Chaka's visit to a World Vision distribution event in rural Matabeleland South on August 25 disclosed no disruption in the donor's control of its operation but UNDP reported that its staff had begun to get pressure related to the policy. UNDP and WFP have met with Mugabe and with the Ministry and reported that the government appears prepared to back-track. Donors will seek to secure control over distribution operations through a WFP/UNDP MOU with the government. The MOU expired in November 2002 and is being renegotiated. The bilateral MOUs between the GOZ and our three C-SAFE partners also will need to be signed again for a one-year period before the new year.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: The policy document appears to have been a clumsy government effort to get the upper hand in MOU negotiations that were underway before its promulgation. The government has backed down from similar attempts to gain control of food distribution in the past, but UNDP has expressed concern that GOZ attitudes seem to be hardening (septel). Sharpening the GOZ's imperative now is that the Grain Marketing Board, the government's food distribution organ, now lacks sufficient resources to begin to feed traditional constituencies in its politically driven domestic relief efforts. The government is loath to turn over such constituencies to international relief and thereby relinquish ZANU-PF influence over its heartland. The donors have told UNDP that the proposed new rules of the game are not acceptable and have urged the UNDP to take a tough line in negotiating the MOU. Proposed USG policy position will follow septel.

SULLIVAN